

In the 1850's, the War of the Romantics occurred between the conservatives, led by Brahms, and the progressives, led by Wagner and Liszt. The progressives were proponents of programmatic music in which there was a clear narrative and concrete story occurring within the music. They argued that the time of absolute music had come to its end. Composers on the conservative side continued to write absolute music in which there was no explicit narrative or story occurring. Despite their insistence that their music was absolute, music theorists have devised methods of interpreting narratives within this absolute music. One of the first theorists to do this was E.T. Cone and more recent theorists include Robert Hatten and Byron Almén¹. Cone achieved this through musical agents, Hatten through marked and unmarked elements of expressive genres, and Almén connected to the larger literary tradition through narrative archetypes. These theorists argued for clear narratives within non-programmatic works that did not contain text.

However, what happens when a piece of absolute music contains conflicting narrative elements? An example of this is the first movement of Brahms Op. 38 in which there is an unclear victory or defeat of transgression. The lack of clarity comes from the tragic signifiers presented throughout the work that are seemingly thwarted by the major-mode coda at the conclusion of the movement. This major-mode coda, however, contains tragic signifiers from earlier in the work that undermine the sense of positive resolution found in the coda. The ambiguity of the victory or defeat of the transgressor leaves a narrative that could be viewed as tragic or comedic. In order to circumvent the unsatisfactory closure of the first movement, I will analyze all three movements and show the similarities that connect them into a singular narrative in the same way that Kinderman analyzes the narrative within Beethoven Op. 110. While the

¹ Cone 1974, Hatten 1994, and Almén 2008.

first movement is ambiguous, the third movement represents a literary catastrophe, which is defined by Encyclopaedia Britannica as “The final action that completes the unraveling of the plot in a play, especially a tragedy.” It is filled with tragic signifiers, pervasive metric dissonance, and intense degradation of form that undermines any sense of a comedic reading. In this paper, I will show how the ambiguous ending of the first movement of Brahms Op. 38 is part of a single, multi-movement narrative in which persistent tragic signifiers, metric dissonance, and formal degradation will confirm an overall tragic archetype. To achieve this, I will review the literature on narrative theory, provide an analysis of the first movement, a brief analysis of the second movement, and an in-depth analysis of the third movement.

In his book, *The Composer's Voice*, E.T. Cone outlines a theory for interpreting musical narrative by assigning agency and characterizations to musical elements. He begins with vocal music because the presence of text often provides explicit narrative elements such as characters, setting, and mood. In a prototypical art song, vocalists take on roles as characters and the accompaniment acts as a narrator. Since characters cannot hear narrators, the vocal agents cannot be conscious of the accompaniment and are unaware of the full narrative (Cone 1974, 30)². They are merely characters expressing the text. Contrasting this, the narrator is conscious of the agents and knows the complete narrative. Therefore, it is capable of foreshadowing what is going to happen to the characters. To put this in more familiar terms, the narrator is functioning like non-diegetic music in film (Neumeyer 2009, 29). The combination of the characters and the narrator creates what is referred to as the complete musical persona.

Within instrumental music, however, the lack of text makes it more difficult to clearly outline a narrative. Cone remedies this problem by assigning unique agential qualities to

² Cone states that vocal characters are also unaware of the fact that they are singing, as is often the case in operas and musicals (1974, 30).

differentiate instrumental characters. Acknowledging the more abstract nature of instrumental narrative, Cone defines instruments as virtual agents rather than as characters. This distinction is to clarify that they do not have text and cannot explicitly relay the narrative. In most cases, these agents are unitary, in which a single instrument represents a single agent. In other cases, multiple instruments may represent a single agent, or a single instrument may represent multiple agents, such as the singer in *Erlkönig*.³ Agents that maintain their role throughout an entire work are referred to as permanent whereas any agent that does not maintain its role is referred to as temporary. In the context of chamber music, agents are typically permanent rather than temporary, due to nature of chamber music in which every player is a soloist. The last critical label that can be assigned within instrumental agents is leading and subordinate. As the names suggest, subordinate characters accompany the leading characters. Agents are also capable of alternating between these roles throughout the course of a work.

Unlike in *Erlkönig*, I argue that the narrative in Brahms Op.38 is a dialogue between two permanent unitary characters. It is clear that the cello is a permanent, unitary agent, rather than a temporary, implicit one, because it is a solo, melodic instrument that has a limited capacity to express multiple voices and it is present throughout the work. I argue that the piano should also be analyzed as a singular agent because it plays themes and presents counter melodies frequently throughout, it exchanges melodic ideas and motifs with the cello, and at times is even accompanied by the cello (Example 1). This alternation between leading and subordinate roles shows that the relationship between the two instruments is an equal, conversational one, not the dynamic of a lone character and a narrator.

³ The same is true for the solo violin arrangement of *Erlkönig* by H.W. Ernst.



Example 1: Brahms Op. 38, cello accompanying piano, mm. 242–247.

The key choices within Brahms Op. 38 suggest that this contentious relationship is part of a larger tragic narrative based on the markedness of the subsidiary key areas and their tragic associations. Naturally, minor-mode works lend themselves to tragedy more than major keys. The exposition modulates to the key of VI, a key associated with deceptive cadences and resolutions whereas the recapitulation modulates to the key of bII, a key associated with uncanniness and tragedy. In both the exposition and recapitulation, the secondary and closing themes are presented in different keys which marks a break from prototypical norms. In addition to this, the key of bII is distantly related and abnormal within Brahms' sonata forms. (mini corpus study here) Though these keys do not necessarily have to be tragic, the presence of other signifiers supports the tragic nature of this piece. One of these supporting signifiers is the *pianto* motif, taking the form of $b\hat{6}-\hat{5}$, that first appears as the first non-tonic triad note of the primary theme, as well as regularly throughout the first movement (Example 2). This descending half-step motif, originally associated with lamentation or tears, has come to more generally signify tragedy or grief (Monelle 2000, 17). Chromatic presentations of the *pianto* motif are significantly more marked and suggest a higher degree of tragedy, which occur in both the expository and recapitulatory major-mode secondary theme areas, as well as in the major-mode coda. From a Schenkerian perspective, the key areas also mirror the *pianto* motif with the progression from bVI to v, and less directly bII to i.



Example 2: The *pianto* motif found in the first two measures of the piece.

Knowing that there are two unitary agents and an assortment of tragic signifiers raises the question: what is the nature of these agents in relation to a tragic narrative? Using Krebs' methodology of analyzing metric dissonance, I argue that the interaction of thematic material and the agents should be viewed as two individuals in a combative exchange based on the extended passages of metric dissonance between them. In his book, *Fantasy Pieces: Metrical Dissonance in the Music of Robert Schumann*, Krebs categorizes different types of metric dissonance and sorts them into a hierarchy from more to less dissonant. The two primary types of dissonance are displacement and grouping. Krebs considers grouping dissonances to be weaker than displacement dissonances because the former will always metrically align at some point whereas the latter can never metrically align. When only one dissonance is occurring at a time, it is referred to as a simple dissonance and when two or more dissonances are occurring it is referred to as a compound dissonance. Krebs states that the combination of a grouping and displacement dissonance produces the most striking kind of compound dissonance (1999, 59). Within the first movement of Brahms Op. 38, the combative nature of the two instruments' relationship is most evident in the markedly dissonant closing theme. The first two themes, the PT and ST contain multiple tragic signifiers that establish the negative relationship between the two characters. It is not until the CT that this relationship becomes clearly combative due to the presence of metric dissonance. The dissonance present here, to use the terminology of Krebs, is a displacement dissonance (Example 3). This metric displacement results in a striking dissonance in which there is no point where the beats align until the displacement is resolved.

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Example 3: Expository closing theme of the first movement with displacement dissonance throughout (mm. 54–76).

The extended presence of tragic signifiers and metric dissonance suggest an overall tragic narrative, which can be understood through Almén's tragic narrative archetype. In his book, *A Theory of Musical Narrative*, Almén outlines four narrative archetypes, including a tragic

archetype, that are established by interactions between order and transgression. Each archetype is created from the victory or defeat of transgression or order. The battle between transgression and order can be carried out by musical agents. These agents are not essential for establishing a narrative in Almén's work, but they do strengthen a narrative. These agents have a broader scope than the musical agents present in Cone's work in that they can be represented by key areas, motifs, and signifiers in addition to instrumental characters (Almén 2008, 59–60). The tragic archetype is defined as the defeat of a transgression by an order imposing hierarchy.⁴ Almén uses Schubert's Piano Sonata in Bb Major as an example of a tragic archetype. In his reading, the narrative is played out by one character with a conflict between two opposing mentalities in its mind. The piece utilizes pastoral and heroic topics which mark the character as a hero. However, this hero has a hidden flaw, represented by abnormal hypermeter and tragic signifiers, that cause it to fail in its heroic goals. Failure represents order and transgression is the hero's attempts to overcome failure. Though the hero gains momentum towards victory, it inevitably fails, and a tragic archetype is established.

I argue that Brahms Op. 38 engenders a tragic narrative through the second type of interaction between narrative and topic described by Almén: narrative within a single overarching topic (2008, 81). This interaction depends on the narrative archetype aligning with a topic that is found regularly within the piece. An example of a Type II interaction given by Almén is Chopin's Prelude in G Major in which the topics, such as the hypnotic and rustic ostinato, create a mood of "harmony-in-nature." These topics assure the listener that despite the narrative conflict, the piece will end positively (Almén 2008, 81). Another example given is

⁴ This definition may seem counterintuitive as many would consider it a positive occurrence when order is victorious. However, in this situation the listener is supporting the transgressor and is against the order imposing hierarchy.

Chopin's C-minor Prelude Op. 28, No. 20, in which the listener expects a tragic narrative due to the presence of tragic topics throughout the work. This expectation is then met by a narrative that matches the topics (Almén 2008, 81). Similarly, Brahms Op. 38 uses tragic signifiers throughout, and each thematic section contains some form of a tragic signifier.

A tragic reading of Brahms Op. 38 suggests that a combative relationship between the two individual characters acts as the order imposing hierarchy and the transgressive attempts to repair this relationship are thwarted. Accepting the earlier reading of musical agents, the cello and piano represent two individuals in a negative and combative relationship, which are represented by the tragic signifiers and metric dissonance. The negative order in this piece then is the contentious relationship between the two individuals. Transgression, therefore, can be seen as any attempts to reconcile or heal this relationship. In order for the piece to fit Almén's tragic archetype, transgression must be defeated by order and the transgressor must be a protagonist that is supported by the listener. The transgressor's attempts to remedy the negative relationship are noble and earn the support of the listener. The question now is whether or not the transgressor is defeated.

Looking solely at the first movement, however, it may seem like transgression gained victory over order due to the parallel-major coda and resolution of metric dissonance, which suggests a comedic archetype or even Hatten's tragic-to-transcendent expressive genre. A comedic archetype is the polar opposite of a tragic archetype; it is the victory of transgression over order. If order is viewed as the negative relationship between the two characters and transgression is viewed as repairing this relationship, there is certainly an argument for a comedic interpretation of the first movement. The tragic, minor key is abandoned for the parallel major and the metric dissonance is resolved for the first time since its onset. These two

occurrences clearly go against the order imposing hierarchy and suggest victory for the transgressor, resulting in a comedic archetype.⁵ Within Hatten's work, there is a concept of expressive genres and a chief one of these is the tragic-to-transcendent genre. This occurs when a movement is established as tragic through its various signifiers and key areas but then moves to a transcendent, major-mode area. The transcendent genre is recognized by more static harmony, a lighter texture, and a major key area (Hatten 1994, 15–16.) All three of these aspects are found within the major-mode coda of the movement which suggests another way that the tragedy of this piece may have been defeated or resolved (Example 4).

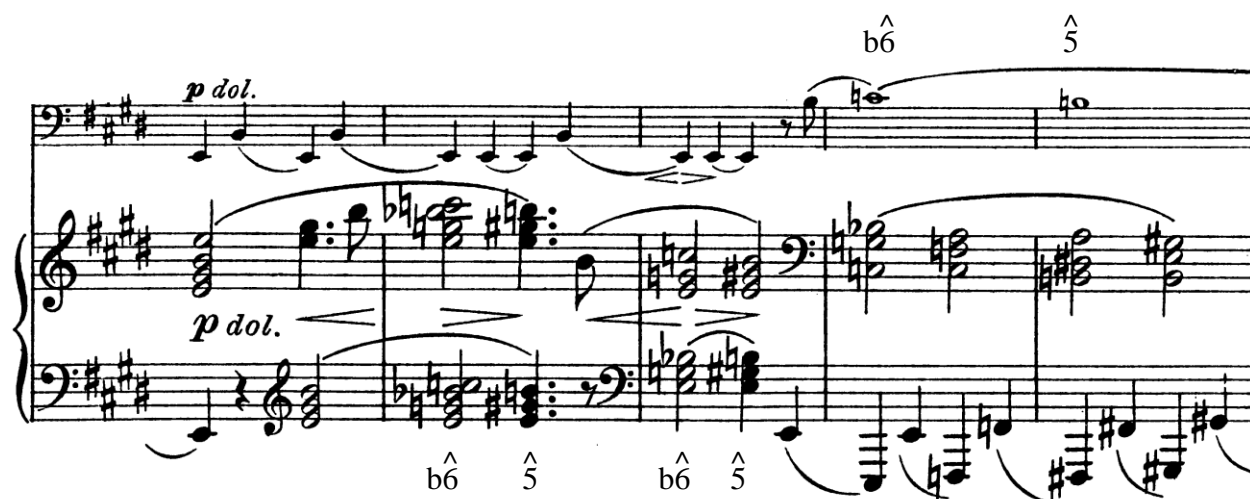


Example 4: Transcendent qualities in the coda of movement I (mm. 246–252).

This happy, comedic reading is made ambiguous the reappearance of prior tragic signifiers in the major-mode coda. The $\hat{b}6-\hat{5}$ *pianto* motif has served as a salient tragic signifier throughout the movement. It was present at the onset of primary theme and was subsequently presented chromatically in the secondary theme. It is especially marked when it appears chromatically, as it does five times within the major-mode coda (Example 5). This raises the question, are these *pianto* motifs merely outliers in a happy ending or do they possess a greater

⁵ Almén clarifies that comedic does not necessarily mean humorous or light-hearted, it can also be used to describe a generic happy ending (2008, 188).

meaning? If they are treated with significance, these *pianto* motifs undermine the notion that the negative relationship has been truly resolved. Rather, the prior tension is bubbling just beneath the surface.



Example 5: Three instances of the *pianto* motif in mm. 255–259 of the coda.

Due to the ambiguous nature of this coda, justification arises for a multimovement analysis in order to provide more clarity. If we look at the first movement of Brahms Op. 38 on its own, we are left with an ambiguous, unsatisfying narrative. There is some sense of a comedic resolution but the presence of the *pianto* motif weakens it. An analysis of the entire piece may provide more clarity. In Hatten's work, he says that expressive genres are often extended over more than one movement (1994, 86). An obvious example of this is Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in which the first movement is tragic, and the last movement is triumphant. This progression results in a tragic-to-triumphant expressive genre for the entire piece (Hatten 1994, 86).⁶ Kinderman provides an opus level narrative analysis of Beethoven Op. 110 on the basis that each individual movement represents one open ended phase in an over-arching narrative. He

⁶ Knowing Brahms' concerns with living up to Beethoven's legacy and his reverence for Beethoven's work, it is possible that Brahms would write a multi-movement narrative in an attempt to mirror Beethoven.

argues that each movement is connected by thematic and modal elements and satisfactory narrative closure is not achieved until the final movement (Kinderman 1992, 140–141). Brahms Op. 38 features similar parallels between the outer movements in terms of salient instances of the *pianto* motif and their shared key of E minor. To receive a satisfactory closure on the narrative of Brahms Op. 38, it would be beneficial to analyze the next two movements and see whether they prolong the ambiguity, support the comedic interpretation, or confirm the tragic onset of the work.

While the second movement of Brahms Op. 38 appears simple at first glance, it contains subtle sinifiers of tragedy and division such as prominent *pianto* motifs and irregular hypermeter. This movement is in a ternary form with a light and playful A section that is contrasted by a passionate, lyrical B section. Both of these sections are in a minor key, the former in A minor and the latter in F# minor. The A section contains numerous examples of the *pianto* motif that often occur in the bass but occasionally are also presented in the melody (Example 6a). The B section opens with repetitions of the *pianto* motif and it is a primary component of the thematic material (Example 6b). It is prominently repeated throughout the entire section, occurring at least once in each voice. These repeated tragic signifiers can be seen as extending the *pianto* motif from the major-mode coda and further discrediting a comedic reading of the first movement. This dissatisfaction with the comedic reading is further compounded by the presence of hypermetrical dissonance as described by McClelland in his book, *Brahms and the Scherzo*. He analyzes this second movement and puts particular emphasis on the irregular hypermeter of the B section. The continual presence of extended upbeats manipulates the otherwise normal 4-bar hypermeter (McClelland 2010, 113). This hypermetrical disruption shows that on a fundamental level, this movement is unstable and unsettled, seemingly a parallel to the relationship of the

cello and the piano. Combining the ambiguous nature of the first movement's coda with these tragic signifiers and underlying hypermetrical tension does not bode well for a comedic reading.

Interval labels above the top staff: $b6 \hat{5}$ $b6 \hat{5}$ $b6 \hat{5}$ $b6 \hat{5}$

Interval labels below the grand staff: $b6 \hat{5}$ $b6 \hat{5}$ $b6 \hat{5}$ $b6 \hat{5}$

Example 6a: The *pianto* motif within the second movement's A section in the key of A minor.

(mm. 8–14)

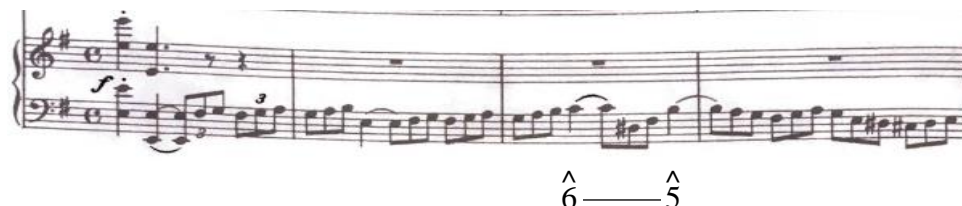
Example 6b: The first four measures of the second movement's B section in F# minor, note the *piano* motif present in every voice. (mm. 76–79)

The third movement of Brahms Op. 38 is commonly referred to as a sonata-fugue, which applies quite well to this work's exposition. A sonata-fugue is the incorporation of fugal elements into an otherwise prototypical sonata form and they can be seen in the works of both Haydn and Mozart. In this movement, the sonata exposition begins with a fugal exposition and the fugue subject acts as the primary theme. Eventually, the fugal connotations are dropped but the thematic material remains throughout the duration of the section. The movement continues through a transition section that features energy gain and fragmentation of the primary theme. The medial caesura is substituted for a medial caesura-fill in which the texture thins and both instruments *decrescendo* into the secondary theme. While the secondary theme features the prototypical elements of being a lyrical theme in the relative major, it also contains a significant formal disruption through a deformed EEC. Rather than a PAC between the secondary theme

and closing theme, there is an IAC. This lesser cadence significantly weakens the effectiveness of the EEC and as a result destabilizes the closure of the exposition.

While the exposition aligns with a sonata-fugue design, the development and recapitulation contain significant irregularities, such as key areas, structural closure, and the presentation of themes, that make it difficult to definitely label this as any kind of normative sonata form. This development begins prototypically with fragments of earlier themes, shifting tonalities, and a dominant pedal near the end. However, it becomes problematic when a near full statement of the secondary theme is given in the key of V. In Cosgrove's 1995 dissertation, she analyzes the recapitulation as beginning with this statement of the secondary theme in V (26–27). In Goble's 2010 Master's thesis, she analyzes this secondary theme statement as part of the development and analyzes the recapitulation as beginning after this with a statement of the primary theme also beginning in V (18–23). Goble's analysis seems to be stronger than Cosgrove's when it comes to the recapitulation because the recap begins with primary theme material. However, the primary theme beginning in V still marks a significant degradation of form. If this analysis is accepted, the thematic and harmonic recapitulations of this movement occur at different points. Though the primary theme in m. 132 modulates to I after 4 measures, a PAC in E minor is not achieved until 26 measures later in m. 158. This discrepancy between the thematic and harmonic recapitulation is an intense disruption of sonata form and it significantly weakens the form. After this point, the recapitulation omits both the secondary and closing themes. This omission also means that there is no ESC present within the work. According to Hepokoski and Darcy, this lack of an ESC means that the movement fails to achieve structural closure at the appropriate point and instead pushes this closure until the coda (2006, 246). The weakened EEC, off-set thematic and harmonic recapitulation, omission of secondary and closing

themes, and the lack of an ESC makes the nature of this form highly abnormal and generates significant difficulty with definitively calling this movement a sonata-fugue. If this movement is a sonata-fugue form, it is one that has been subjected to intense formal degradation.



Example 7: The fugue subject in the first four measures of the third movement, note the *pianto* motif in measure 3.

The formal degradation, in this final movement suggests a reversion to a tragic state by frequently recalling tragic signifiers from the first movement. This final movement returns to the key of E minor, the opening key of work, which has become associated with tragedy by this point in the music. Similar to the first movement, the *pianto* motif is presented early on within the primary theme and, though it is not as immediately evident as before, its presence is still heard through the C⁴ to B³ motion in the upper voice (Example 7). Additionally, it is played chromatically when the fugue answers in the key of V. This chromatic alteration is another callback to the beginning of the work. Another important tragic signifier within this movement is the bII chord that occurs as the final predominant of the piece (Example 8), which is outlined by the cello and piano in the last two beats of m. 196 and the first beat of m. 197.



Example 8: The final three measures of the piece with Roman numerals. The clefs from top to bottom are: bass, treble, bass.

These tragic signifiers are further intensified by near constant metric dissonance throughout the entire final movement. Whereas the first movement only contained displacement dissonances, the third movement of Brahms Op. 38 features a compound, grouping, displacement dissonance early on, the most severe kind of metric dissonance according to Krebs (1999, 59). The subject of the fugue exposition is in a triple meter, suggesting 12/8. Countersubject 1 is in a duple meter that suggests 4/4. Countersubject 2 is also in 4/4 but the barring suggests displacement at times. The relationships between lines are as follows: the subject and countersubject 1 constitute a grouping dissonance of 12/8 against 4/4, countersubject 1 and countersubject 2 create a displacement dissonance in 4/4, and the subject and countersubject 2 create a displaced grouping dissonance (Example 9a). The result of the interactions between these lines is one of intense metric dissonance and conflict and it is not limited to the opening; it extends throughout the entire movement. The three-against-two grouping dissonance is so pervasive that it even occurs during the *tranquillo* secondary theme. The transition contains an extended passage of displacement dissonance between the cello and the right hand of the piano as well as grouping dissonance with the left hand of the piano (Example 9b). The coda features

pervasive grouping dissonance with the cello and piano each alternating between triple and duple figures until the end of the work. Further adding to the intensity, there is a passage of compound, grouping, displacement dissonance present within this coda (Example 9c). The constant metric dissonance as well as the presence of the most intense kind of metric dissonance within this final movement's coda is a stark contrast to the metric resolution and comedic elements of the first movement's coda.



Example 9a: The fugue exposition of the third movement, mm. 1–13. In mm. 9–12, the cello is playing countersubject 1, the RH piano is playing the subject, and the LH piano is playing countersubject 2.

Example 9b: Mm. 42–49 of the expository transition. Note the displacement dissonance between the cello and RH piano from mm. 44–49 as well as the grouping dissonance with the LH piano.

Example 9c: Mm. 184–189 of the coda. Note the displacement dissonance between the cello and RH piano as well as the grouping dissonance with the LH piano.

The large-scale formal degradation of the third movement, in combination with the reoccurring tragic signifiers, dismantle any semblance of a comedic archetype for this entire opus. The argument for a comedic archetype came from the first movement's resolution of metric dissonance, major-key modulation, and the choice to view the *pianto* motif within the coda as an outlier. As demonstrated, an analysis of the third movement refutes each of these claims. The work is more metrically dissonant than ever at this point. The conflict permeates every aspect of the piece and even creates the most striking kind of dissonance: the simultaneous

presentation of grouping and displacement dissonance. The major-mode resolution of the first movement is also thwarted. The final movement is firmly in E minor at the beginning and end of the work. Further adding to this, the formal degradation throughout the movement bars any hope of resolution. According to Hepokoski and Darcy, this movement never achieves structural closure due to the lack of an ESC. This large-scale erosion of form simulates the lack of resolution between the cello and piano. Finally, this movement recalls the numerous signifiers from the first movement that established it as tragic. The *pianto* motif is made prominent in the primary theme and is repeated multiple times within the work. It is again played chromatically which further emphasizes its tragic nature. The notorious, uncanny bII chord that served as a tragic signifier within the first movement also makes an appearance at the end of this final movement. The combination of formal degradation, metric dissonance, key areas, and tragic signifiers concretely refute any hope of a comedic reading for this piece and solidify a tragic reading. This paper has demonstrated one method of achieving a satisfactory closure to an ambivalent narrative. I would like to find more examples of 19th-century instrumental works with ambivalent or ambiguous narratives and devise concrete methods of remedying these issues to provide satisfactory closure.